

Ecclesiastes

In the Hebrew, the title of this book is all of Ecclesiastes 1:1. The Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) gave it the name “Ekklesiastes,” from which the English title is a transliteration. This word is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *qohelet* (Ecc. 1:1), which means “teacher.” The book claims that it contains the teachings of Solomon (Ecc. 1:1, 12; 2:26; 2:4-9; 12:9). Most scholars believe that a separate, unknown author gathered the teachings of Solomon into his own book sometime after the reign of Solomon but before the exile.

The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job are considered wisdom literature. While narrative uses stories to reveal the character of Yahweh and the nature of humanity, and poetry is the expression of human emotions to Yahweh, wisdom literature instructs and provides the practical skills to obtain a good and full life. The books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job are all asking the question “What does it mean to live well in the world?” Each book explores what it means to have the good life, with three different perspectives.¹ The good life is directly connected to the retribution principle, which means that the righteous will be rewarded justly for good behavior and the wicked will be punished justly for bad behavior. It is not possible to have a good life if there is no justice for good and bad behavior in the world.

Proverbs provides the perspective of Lady Wisdom who is a wise teacher, who believes that Yahweh is wise and just, and there is a clear cause and effect between doing the right thing and being rewarded or doing the wrong thing and suffering. Ecclesiastes speaks as the cynic who makes the observation that this is not always true. Life is not just; sometimes bad things happen to good people and good things happen to foolish people. And Job is the old man who has seen and suffered a lot in his life and questions justice of Yahweh when good people suffer. All three of these books together address the wisdom of Yahweh and how one is to live wisely and obtain the good life in a fallen world.

Purpose

The purpose of the book of Ecclesiastes is to demonstrate that humans cannot grasp the meaning in life and, thus, one’s only meaning is found in Yahweh. Proverbs consistently assumes that good behavior results in positive outcomes and bad behavior results in negative outcomes. The teacher in Ecclesiastics denies these outcomes as consistent. The retribution principle does not work, and it should. Life is unfair. The wise and the foolish share the same outcomes regardless of how they conduct themselves (Ecc. 2:14-16; 8:14). The teacher recognizes the contradictions in life, which is what leads to his statement that life is meaningless. Quoting one side of the tension without acknowledging the other leads to serious distortion. The reader is challenged to allow the competing claims to be heard, and to find truth in their clash.²

The book address two principal questions. The first is whether human experience is meaningful, controllable, and predictable. The teacher’s answer is that people are not able to glean meaning from life or control their circumstances. The only certainty in life is death. The second is whether human well-being is possible. The teacher’s answer is that it is possible to enjoy the pleasures of life, food, family, and work. Thus, these two conclusions are in tension. Life has no discernable

¹ See Temper Longman III. *Proverbs*, pp. 61-63.

² See Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, p. 167.

meaning, but it still can be enjoyed. There is the possibility of joy, but it exists within the context of human limitations.³

Structure

There are two voices in the book of Ecclesiastes, the author and the cynical teacher.⁴ The book begins with the voice of the author, who introduces the teacher and gives a summary of his words (Ecc. 1:1-11). The author is the one who has gathered the words of the teacher and placed them in the book of Ecclesiastes. The main body contains the words of the teacher (Ecc. 1:2-12:7). The book then ends with the final conclusion of the author (Ecc. 12:9-14).

Beyond this no scholar can really agree on a clear structure to the book of Ecclesiastes. Many scholars try to find a structure based on the topics and themes of the book, as is done with many other of the books of the Bible. But the teacher often doubles back to pick up a theme that has already been dealt with, making clear structural markers difficult to identify. This lack of structure may be intentional on the teacher's part as he makes the point that it is not possible to find the meaning of things in life. A. G. Wright approached the problem of structure from the point of view of repetition of key phrases rather than topics.⁵

The prologue (Ecc. 1:1-11) is the voice of the author, who introduces the teacher, who will be the voice of parts one and two.

Part one (Ecc. 1:12-6:9) is the words of the teacher and is divided into an introduction (Ecc. 1:12-18) and six sections (Ecc. 2:1-11; 2:12-17; 2:18-26; 3:1-5:6; 4:7-16; 4:17-6:9), each ending with the repetition of “meaninglessness” (*hevel*) or “chase after the wind.”

Part two (Ecc. 6:10-11:6) is the words of the teacher and is divided into an introduction (Ecc. 6:10-12) with four sections (Ecc. 7:1-14; 7:15-24; 7:25-29; 8:1-17), which are separated by the phrase “not find out” or “who can find out.” There are four more sections (Ecc. 9:1-12; 9:13-10:15; 10:16-11:2; 11:3-6) separated by the phrase “do not know.” This is followed by a closing epilogue of the teacher (Ecc. 11:7-12:7).

The final epilogue (Ecc. 12:8-14) is the voice of the author, who gives a final conclusion to the words of the teacher.

The Words of the Teacher (1:1-12:7)

The book of Ecclesiastes begins with the voice of the author, who introduces and summarizes the words of the teacher (Ecc. 1:1-11). The main point of the teacher is that everything is “meaningless” (*hevel*). The teacher then speaks for the majority of the book (Ecc. 12:9-14), explaining why he has concluded that everything is meaningless. The words of the teacher are depressing, but one needs read them for they contain wisdom. The reader must pay attention to the repetition and the conclusions the teacher makes. It is in the end that the author will put the teacher's insights in a proper theological perspective (Ecc. 12:9-14).

The word translated “meaningless” or “vanity” comes from the Hebrew word *hevel*, which means “breath” or “vapor.” Other meanings that derive from this are “fleeting,” “vain,” “futile,”

³ See Roland E. Murphy and Elizabeth Huwiler. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs*, p. 159.

⁴ See Tremper Longman III. *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, p. 21.

⁵ See Roland E. Murphy. *Ecclesiastes*, p. xxxviii.

and even “deceitful.” In the context of Ecclesiastes, the teacher is not saying that everything is meaningless, but several times he says it cannot be known. He connects the word *hevel* with the phrase “chasing after the wind,” which communicates the idea that meaning cannot be grasped. Roland E. Murphy says the idea is that of “absurd,” in the sense of incomprehensible. The teacher is a skeptic to the knowability of the world, not a pessimist viewing the world with no meaning at all.⁶ Therefore, the teacher is using the word *hevel* to communicate that the meaning of life is like vapor or smoke, in that it exists, but when one goes to grasp it, it escapes one’s grasp, like a chasing after the wind. The teacher is using *hevel* as a metaphor to make the point that things do have meaning, but humans cannot grasp the meaning on their own. The meaning of all the worldly realities humans must deal with in life is an enigma, like smoke.

The teacher begins by stating that he searched for meaning in every way that one could and found no meaning to anything. He pursued wisdom (Ecc. 1:12-18; 2:12-16), pleasure (Ecc. 2:1-11), work (Ecc. 2:17-26), and wealth (Ecc. 5:8-6:9) and found it all to be meaningless. As he discusses these pursuits for meaning, the teacher gives three reasons all this is meaningless.⁷

First, time is always passing away, and nothing ever changes. In the grand scheme of world history, your individual life is merely a brief moment in history. Day by day passes, and for the most part nothing really changes in your life (Ecc. 1:4-7; 3:1-8). Life is filled with sleep, work, and pleasure. But you just go from one thing to the next and do it all again until you realize that the years have gone by and nothing has really changed. No matter how much knowledge one gains, it still is nothing compared to all the things that can be known. And no matter how much wisdom humans have, they still make selfish and dumb decisions. With everything that humans see and do, they are never satisfied and always want more. The days of consuming go by, and humans are greedy for more experiences, and yet none of it changes them or anything in their lives because they are not satisfied by it. People spend their whole lives working day after day and accomplish very little and barely survive. And for those who accomplish great feats and wealth through their work, even they lose relationships and are not content, and everything they built will fall apart after they are gone. And throughout the generations nothing really changes with human nature or the way the world works. Yes, technology and cultural styles change, but the way people view the world, function, and use the technology does not change. And nothing one does or creates is original; it has all been done before (Ecc. 1:8-11; 3:15). It has all been copied from nature or from someone else. To find meaning in the days that go by and why things happen is hopeless and a chasing after the wind.

Second, death comes to everyone, and no one is ever remembered (Ecc. 2:15-16; 3:18-21; 9:1-10). No matter whether you are righteous or wicked, wise or foolish, life is filled with pleasure or suffering; whether you are a hard worker or lazy, wealthy or poor, everyone dies. Everything that one accomplished and experienced is lost in death. And each day of life that goes by, you are one day closer to your death than you were before. And when you are dead, you are forgotten. Yes, your family and friends will remember you, but they too will die, and their memory of you will be lost as well. Even if one was famous and accomplished great feats, these will also be forgotten. Many great kings who built empires are forgotten in the sands of time. And the few names that are known—Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander, Julius Caesar—are merely names with a few facts about them, not a memory of who they were as people. Everything that one

⁶ See Roland E. Murphy. *Ecclesiastes*, p. lix.

⁷ See Tim Mackie and John Collins. “Wisdom Literature.”

accumulated or built will eventually fade away and the memory of the person with it. What is the point of being righteous or wise when one shares the same fate as the wicked and the fool? Understanding the meaning of this is hopeless and a chasing after the wind.

Third, life is nothing but chance, and wisdom does not always lead to the good life (Ecc. 8:9-17; 9:11-12; 10:5-9). Unlike the book of Proverbs, the teacher does not believe there is a clear cause and effect between doing the right thing and being rewarded or doing the wrong thing and suffering. Many times the wicked, foolish, and lazy are rewarded while the righteous, wise, and hard-working suffer. Even when people do the right thing and work hard, bad things happen to them, and there is no rhyme or reason for it. Likewise, many corrupt and selfish people are extremely successful even as they oppress the righteous and the innocent. Good people die young, and wicked people live for a long time. The health fanatic dies of cancer, and the alcoholic lives a long life. To try to master one's life with the wise principles of Proverbs will only lead to failure and disillusionment. There is something wrong with creation, a glitch in the system, and things do not always work or turn out the way they should. Understanding the meaning of this is hopeless and a chasing after the wind.

The insights of the teacher are depressing, but they are not wrong. As one lives and observes the fallen world of sin (the glitch) we live in, one comes to the same conclusion as the teacher (Ecc. 12:9-10). Yet all through the book there is another repeating phrase that puts the words of the teacher in its proper perspective. The repeating phrase is "under the sun" (used 27 times) or "under the heavens" (used 3 times). All of creation is under the sun, and the only thing that is above the sun or in the heavens are Yahweh and the gods. Remember, the teacher did not believe that there was *no meaning* to life and everything, only that humans could not grasp its meaning. Yet Yahweh, who is above the sun, does understand the meaning of everything under the sun. This perspective is what the author will build his concluding remarks on. The teacher warns that one will never find meaning in life if they invest in what is under the sun. The author will then point the reader to invest in what is above the sun. This is a problem because the teacher has no certain belief in the afterlife (Ecc. 3:18-21; 12:1-7). Thus, if there is no justice in this life, then humans have no motivation to live life with wisdom and righteousness. He even advises to avoid being overly righteous or wise as well as overly wicked or foolish (Ecc. 7:16-17).

The teacher is not a pessimist who thinks there is no point to life, to being wise, or to living righteously. The teacher recognizes the perspective of Proverbs. It is a really good idea to learn wisdom and to live in the fear of Yahweh (Ecc. 7:11-12; 8:12). Generally speaking, it does lead to a more content life. But do not think naïvely that everything will go well, for it does not always guarantee success—but it is the right thing to do. The tension is that he sees the wicked honored and promoted (Ecc. 8:10-15). Theologically, he believes it is better to fear Yahweh, and because the wicked do not fear Yahweh it will not go well with them. Despite this, the righteous often get what the wicked deserve, and the wicked often get what the righteous deserve.

Therefore, the teacher's advice is that since you cannot control your life, you should stop trying to control it. Learn to hold your life and the things of your life with an open hand. Because the only things you have control over are what you say yes and no to and your attitude toward the people, things, and moments of your life. So, stop trying to control things, stop worrying, and choose to enjoy life (Ecc. 3:9-14). Just enjoy the moments and the gifts that Yahweh gives. He knows that Yahweh is at work and is good (Ecc. 11:1-10) and that one will answer to Yahweh for how one lives (Ecc. 12:1-7), but beyond that he has no answer other than to enjoy life within the parameters of Yahweh's law.

The Conclusion of the Author (12:8-14)

The author then speaks again and concludes the book with his own insights (Ecc. 12:8-14). The author states that the words of the wise (biblical wisdom) will guide and bring security to life. True wisdom comes from Yahweh as the only true Shepherd. Any advice in addition to the wisdom of Yahweh is suspect and dangerous. One can be highly educated in the world and still have no wisdom and only be wearied by the task. The author is making it clear that the words of the teacher are true (Ecc. 12:9-10); it is true that life under the sun is difficult and then you die. It is true that life is unfair. But this knowledge must be rooted in the wisdom of Yahweh.

Thus, the author has two conclusions to frame the words of the teacher. First, fear Yahweh and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of humanity. Yahweh is the true authority over creation and the source of wisdom that governs creation. He is the only one who truly knows the meaning of everything that happens in creation, for His providence guides the path of history and our lives. Therefore, it is only when one obeys the will of Yahweh that their path will be guided with wisdom. Even though humans do not know the meaning of everything, we should trust that Yahweh does and is working everything out for our good.

If we invest our pleasure, work, and wealth in the kingdom of Yahweh for His glory, then He will use it in a meaningful way. And when time passes away, then He will redeem it into something that will last for all eternity. And for those who belong to Yahweh, death is not the end, for He will resurrect our lives and works in the new creation. So, create art, sing, build, converse with people, work, and enjoy life for the kingdom of Yahweh. And Yahweh will give it meaning and use it to build and bring people into the kingdom of Yahweh, which will last for eternity.

Second, trust that Yahweh will judge the world, clear away the *hevel*, and bring true justice to the world. The world is not exactly just right now, but one day Yahweh will judge the evil in creation that threatened to strip meaning from life, and He will clear away the *hevel* and reveal the meaning of the moments of our lives. Those who pursued meaning under the sun will be left empty, but those who pursued Yahweh will see the meaning of the moments of their lives become clear. The retribution principle will one day work, but the author gives no explanation of figuring out a system. Our responsibility so be faithful.

The author allowed the teacher to speak because what he said is true. But he does not want you to lose hope—only to make you humble and to trust Yahweh that life has meaning even when you cannot make sense of it.

Conclusion

The book of Ecclesiastes teaches that one cannot find meaning in the events of life under the sun because life is random and filled with chance. So, the author concludes that one must then look to and trust Yahweh with the meaning of their lives. Yahweh is the only one who is wise enough to know the meaning of things under the sun and to direct our lives along the correct path. And only by trusting in His goodness and obeying His laws will one find meaning in life even when the proverbial statements do not always work out to be true. Yet one could question the goodness and justice of Yahweh when experiencing such intense suffering, when there seems to be no evidence of justice and the good life. This is what the book of Job addresses.

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